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ABSTRACT

Necessary conditions for successful integration of computers and other media into education include accessibility of hardware and software, opportunities for training and familiarization, and positive ideology. If these conditions are met, the result will be the development of demand on the part of faculty, pressure for more efficient systems and better utilization, along with innovative applications. This analysis was applied by a professor at Vermont College of Norwich University in order to understand the resistance of faculty to adoption of even simple applications for academic purposes, and to the construction of an approach for changing that. In April 1996, this professor of Graduate Studies communicated by e-mail with 15 different students. Eleven students sent at least one message, and 14 received messages from the professor. Two distinct kinds of messages were distinguished: facilitative and academic. Facilitative messages include those concerned with arrangements for meetings and conference calls, the submission of study plans, evaluations and other tasks. In the academic messages, students asked questions of substance about resources, formats and organization for written work, and developing insights and points of view; critiques of writing, encouragement, and suggestions about relevant experiences are typically offered. Examples of each type of message are provided. (AEF)

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Opening the Door with E-Mail: From No-Tech to Low-Tech

By:

Carla R. Payne

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OPENING THE DOOR WITH E-MAIL: FROM NO TECH TO LOW-TECH

Carla R. Payne Ph.D.

Not long ago, Steven W. Gilbert, director of Technology Projects for the American Association for Higher Education, wrote in a message to the AAHE list: "More than 20 percent of all faculty are already using some applications (especially E-mail and the Web) of information technology in conjunction with their teaching. We're beyond the 'pioneers' or 'early adopter' categories of faculty with respect to educational uses of information technology. The mainstream faculty has begun to use technology in their teaching." I suppose that if you get caught up in the exciting online conversations about pedagogy, technological applications and innovation and so on, which characterize that same AAHE list and others, such as DEOS-L, you might be of the same optimistic mind as Steven Gilbert, and extrapolate from a one-fifth (measured any way you want) to the practices of the "mainstream" among faculty. My own situation does not seem to bear out this interpretation, and if I didn't come to conferences such as this, I might think that we were in a peculiar backwater. I actually believe, however, that wide-spread acceptance of electronic communications as an integral or essential part of learning and teaching still hasn't happened in many places.

Thinking about reasons why this might be so, on the way to devising a strategy for moving my own program forward in educational technology, I identified a number of necessary conditions for successful integration of the computer and other media:

1. Access. If the hardware and the software aren't readily available to faculty, no amount of proselytizing for their advantages will help.

2. Know-how. Opportunities for training and familiarization must exist, as well as on-going, easily accessible support.

3. Positive ideology. Faculty must believe that information technology can enhance learning, and contrariwise, that it will not impair their teaching effectiveness.

If these conditions are met, the result will be the development of demand on the part of faculty, pressure for more efficient systems and better utilization, along with innovative applications..

I applied this analysis to my own situation at Vermont College of Norwich University, to understand the resistance of faculty to adoption of even simple applications for academic purposes, and to the construction of an approach for changing that. My initial focus was on e-mail, since most of us are already using it daily for administrative purposes and because it can be regarded as the relatively low-tech tip of a technological wedge, moving from individual interactions to listservs, and then to asynchronous conferencing and beyond.

My underlying assumption is that the technology can be a powerful tool to facilitate learning.

The Graduate Program and the other adult programs at Vermont College seem to be a natural context for this to happen, since all of them offer individualized, learner centered, low residence formats in which the conceptual leap from direct instruction to independent study at a distance has already taken place. Nevertheless, an informal survey of my dozen colleagues in the GP as to their present use of e-mail for work with students, which elicited 7 replies, produced the information that only two of us are in contact with as many as half of their students in this way. (A full faculty load in the GP is 25 students.) My assessment of the reasons that this is so may be instructive for others who would like to make the first move toward appropriate integration of the computer and other technology.

Accessibility. Norwich University, with established undergraduate programs in engineering, business and architecture, does have an infrastructure to support computer use. Financial, political and logistical factors, having to do in part with a two-campus system, create an uneven distribution of hardware and a scarcity of up-to-date resources available to faculty. Suffice it to say that computers capable of running Windows 95 are not common in faculty offices, and that at present Web connections exist only in computer labs and the libraries. Some faculty, of course, have their own equipment and keep up with the applications relevant to their disciplines. Others, however, are still sufficiently unfamiliar with the possibilities and potentials for their work that they are not generally motivated to pursue the matter. The lack of adequate hardware makes it difficult or impossible for any plausible standard to be set or expectation to be established in this regard.

The situation for communications systems and software across the University is analogous. We use a combination of Pine and Kermit, which makes file transfer clumsy, and a mysterious glitch makes it impossible to print out e-mail messages which are more than two screens long.

Know-how and support. As of this July, at Vermont College we have a full-time educational technologist, charged with supporting the academic use of computers. A great of her time so far has been devoted to working with students during their brief on-campus residencies, but a plan needs to be put in place for faculty training. Offering group sessions tailored to faculty schedules has been only marginally successful, to judge by low attendance and by a lack of subsequent interest. Modeling use by those faculty who are engaged, followed up by individual tutoring, seems to be a more productive path.

Adequate systems support, to prevent or minimize and remedy technical breakdowns, crashes and other disasters, is obviously a sine qua non. Without it, the disaffected and the doubters have lots of ammunition.

Positive ideology. Although most students are prepared to do some learning and take the chance that it will cause changes in their outlook, many faculty do not see themselves as learners and risk-takers in the same way. We don't have many outright Luddites, but we do find a number of purists taking the position that electronic technologies move us away from the serious pursuit of knowledge. Pointing out that the definition of "scholarship" is an evolving one doesn't seem to be as effective in creating converts as the fact of institutional competition for students,

who do expect delivery of academic services to include the full range of options. In respect to the computer, if we use a three-part classification of its functions--accessing information, communication, recording, documenting and presenting results-- we can show that the choices enrich a learner centered system. (Judging the medium by its worst application, the purveying of canned instruction, and ignoring other possibilities and actualities, is not intellectually honest.)

Making the Argument Since my argument is that example is the most powerful persuader, I elected to do a quick analysis of the way my students now voluntarily use the E-mail in their work with me. (For present purposes, I have not considered the proportion which uses the computer for producing their written work or for conducting their own research.) Choosing the month of April 1996, I compiled every interaction, and then took a look at the record to see how I am using E-mail. Although I do not pretend that this is serious empirical investigation, I found that it had value not only as the basis for convincing my colleagues to go and do likewise, but as a very useful perspective on my own practice.

The specific framework within which these exchanges took place is that of a Master of Arts program, with concentrations possible in humanities, social sciences, education and inter-disciplinary areas, offered in a non-resident, independent study format. (The other Vermont college programs share a general philosophy, but vary in regard to length and number of resident periods, degree type and level, etc.) A number of students also prepare for professional careers, (counseling is the most popular), integrating work in required areas with the inquiry-based thematic MA study. Students each work with a core faculty generalist and a field faculty specialist, to develop and implement study plans focused on their own questions and interests. These study plans mark out focal issue(s), resources, methodologies and documentation, as they are understood at the start of the process; the direction and approach is subject to change as learning takes place.

In the original Graduate Program model (which has now been supplemented by a second option with ten weekend residencies a year), students typically do not visit the Vermont campus, except for the annual Colloquium. Core faculty travel to meet with them several time a year, and field faculty are usually drawn from the student's home community. During the rest of the enrollment period, faculty and students maintain a dialogue about the progress of the work. By using mail and telephone, individualized distance education was delivered well before the introduction of the computer as means of communication. E-mail seems to be a very good fit here for carrying the learning process forward in a substantive and responsive way, but faculty have not seized the opportunity with any widespread enthusiasm. My hope is that I can demonstrate student demand by presenting my own experience.

During the target month, I communicated by E-mail with 15 different students. Eleven students sent me at least one message, and 14 received messages from me. The nature of the work of a core faculty member in the Graduate Program is such that our interactions with students do not fall neatly into categories as "tutorial," "instructional" or "administrative," but I was able to distinguish two very general kinds of messages, "facilitative" and "academic." Facilitative messages include those concerned with arrangements for meetings and conference calls, the

submission of study plans, evaluations and so on. In the academic messages, students asked questions of substance about resources, formats and organization for written work, and developing insights and points of view; I typically offered critiques of writing, encouragement, suggestions about relevant experiences, etc, There were more facilitative than academic messages in this batch, although 3 students submitted extended writing or study plans as attached files. Here are samples of each type of message:

Facilitative: (student to faculty)

> *I was wondering if perhaps we could meet sometime during Colloquium. I will be coming down on Saturday for the Final Document workshop at 1:00 pm. Would you have time before then to meet for about 20-30 minutes? I have some questions regarding the final document proposal. As well as some questions on the internship material you gave me. If you cannot do this, Dr. Reece and I felt we should all get together in early May. Thanks for your response.*

Facilitative: (faculty to student):

> *I got your revised study plan, and will review in the next day or two. The Colloquium was good--a very full schedule, and then I was away on vacation for a week. Now is the time to catch up! As far as access to psychological literature is concerned, have you searched the Web yourself? I found that I was able to get a number of scholarly articles by using one or more of the 'search engines', e.g., AltaVista, Yahoo. Then I downloaded them to a disk and/or printed them out.*

Academic (student to faculty):

> *After reading your e-mail and digesting what you said, I feel that the issue of racism in conservation is quite murky. I know that the environmental movement is rife with racism to name just a few issues--dumping toxic wastes in minority neighborhoods. . . the fact that White mid to upper class values are bing imposed in "developing countries. . . .I'm not supporting one side over another, I'm just predenting both sides. The environmental justice movement developed in response to these (and many other) forms of environmental racism. I'm not sure how conservation fits into all of this, but I feel it must, because conservation is part of environmental ism. . . May racism isn't currently inherent in conservation, but I feel it could become so--all too easily. . . . Do you think I'm out of my league here? Referring to your e-mail, I think that "economic disparities" are just the tip of the iceberg . . . .Tell me what you think. I'm very interested in your comments, and I feel like I'm drowning in this issue.*

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Academic: (faculty to student):

> I *have just completing my reading of your first paper. You have done a good job of reviewing some of the important literature, and relating the different approaches to each other. It is clear that you have digested a great deal of information, and that you have a good organizational grasp of the material. I am returning the paper to you by campus mail, so that you can make note of my marginal comments. May of them have to do with minor mechanical points, including spelling, and occasional lapses in sentence structure. . . .I have one major concern with the paper in regard to content. There is no explicit indication in the introduction as to what your purpose is. . . .It's hard to evaluate the effort unless you have stated your objectives. It is also hard to assess your selection of sources without that indication. . . .There were several places where your meaning was not clear, and one (p. 15) where you took a swing at political science which absolutely demands justification. On the whole, though, this is a good job. Let's talk about it.*

The ability of all parties to keep this kind of verbatim record of online contacts presents a unique opportunity for reflection and assessment, and is one of the strengths of this kind of communication. Another is obviously the speed with which it is possible to respond, to capture the "teachable moment" when interest and motivation are high, to intervene quickly when the. student has hit the inevitable low or when a snag threatens continued progress in learning. We do always need to keep in mind that e-mail is a medium with its own characteristics. For example, Banks and Coombs point out that "Scholars who analyze writing have found that e-mail expression falls somewhere between the spoken word and the traditional written word." [1]

Conclusions: As Banks and Coombs say, for many faculty "Another source of interaction seems the last thing he or she needs." But if we look at it from a student perspective, foreclosing a major communications stream, particularly in mentored situations where interaction is the essence of the teacher-learner relationship, is not a reasonable option. And if we look at-mail as a technological Mickey Finn, a relatively easy and seductive way of acclimating users to the computer, preparing them to move on to asynchfonous and real-time conferencing as well as the Web and all its wonders, then it takes on even more value.

("Your Onramp to the Internet: The Power of Electronic Mail," Convention of the American Association for Higher Education, p.4).